

## **Building Relationships with Large Churches**

### **8 Key Suggestions for Agency Mobilizers**

by Ellen Livingood

For this article, Catalyst interviewed a number of missions pastors, including two who themselves had formerly served as regional representatives/mobilizers for mission agencies. Here is their candid advice for those who provide face-to-face connection between their agency and local churches.



#### **COME TO LISTEN TO US RATHER THAN SELL YOUR AGENDA**

Every missions pastor surveyed included this request, usually at the top of their list. Dan Crane, formerly a TEAM representative and now missions pastor at the Evangelical Free Church of Fullerton, CA, emphasizes, "Find out what we need. Ask, 'What is your vision? What are you doing as a church?' Pay attention to our priorities. Take time to listen and demonstrate that you respect what we feel God has called us to do."

Ed Edwards, formerly of WorldVenture and now missions pastor of Hinson Church (Portland, OR) and First Baptist Church (Salem, OR), says, "The key question is, 'Can we be more effective with each other than without?' You've got to know us as well as you want us to know you."



"So many organizations come in and say, 'This is what God has called us to do. Will you help us?' one missions pastor of a large church reported. "But if they don't care about our church, frankly we don't give them much time."

Don't try to force a fit. Church priorities and strategies change. If you build a relationship based on respect for the church and its vision, a future strategy shift or new focus may provide a great match for your agency.



#### **WORK AT UNDERSTANDING LARGE CHURCHES AND OUR CONGREGATION'S UNIQUENESSES**

"Agency mobilizers need to understand my context and the reality of what it means to help lead a congregation," Scott Clifton, missions pastor of Park Community Church in Chicago,

IL, explains. "I want to interact with a missions specialist who understands the urban perspective because we are a city church. For example, many of our people live in a hotel on the road five days a week and come home to Chicago on weekends. This has ramifications for how we approach missions."



How do you get to know the DNA of a church? Don't waste the missions pastor's time by asking questions that are answered online or in church publications. Visit their website and get a feel for the ethos of the church beyond just the missions program. If possible, attend services, pick up literature, and talk to people over coffee or at the visitors' reception. Subscribe to the church newsletter.

Do you need a better grasp of how large churches function? Go in as a learner. These churches respect someone who is teachable. Ask to attend a pastoral staff meeting or missions leadership team meeting as an observer. Or spend a day or a week shadowing the missions pastor. Is the church staff attending a conference such as the Willow Creek Leadership Summit? Participate with them and watch how they process what they learn.

Crane adds a reminder about taking into consideration the missions pastor's personal philosophy. "Some focus on missions mobilization, so they are looking for curriculum or for stories. Others are more focused on nurturing their missionaries. Some totally focus on short terms. Others are really into member care, or partnerships, or field strategy. Recognize that their personal strengths will be reflected in the church's missions approach."



#### **KNOW WHAT YOU HAVE TO OFFER US AND WHAT IS AVAILABLE FROM OTHER SOURCES**

What practical tools and resources can you provide? After you get a sense of the church's priorities and needs, can you suggest specific programs or resources that might be a fit

for that particular congregation? "When I meet with agency representatives," Crane observes, "I am fishing for potential connections to what we are doing. In some cases, we might be willing to consider a full partnership. In other instances, I just want to make sure you will help us care for our missionaries. Yet with others, I may want to use your short-term program or materials."

"If the mobilizer himself has a specific skill or great tool, we will use it," Crane adds. "For example, one agency mobilizer came and trained our team in career mapping. It was great."

Casely Essamuah, missions pastor of Bay Area Community Church in Annapolis, MD, says, "If I have church members who come to me and say they feel called to go to a certain place, I want an agency with expertise in that region to come alongside and help me identify the gaps in their preparation and training. Help me determine what additional education or cross-cultural preparation they need. Let's together decide how to customize a mentoring or internship program for them."



Clifton is looking for agency personnel to serve as consultants and coaches. "We want to form our own church-planting team, and we appreciate the agency that comes alongside to walk us through this process. We are working primarily with young professionals who have an entrepreneurial spirit," he adds. "They respond to coaching rather than to a lot of rules and hoops to jump through. Come coach us and them through the sending process."



"I get invited by agencies to a lot of pastors conferences," Crane notes. "I can't attend many, but if there is something short and local, I consider it. The people who are there are as important as the program. For example, if you are bringing together churches involved in a particular project, then I want to go to talk to others who share our interest in that region or task. Facilitating such meetings is a service to me as a missions pastor."

Essamuah appreciates such conferences but because of time constraints, he often sends key laypeople. "I see it as a good way to increase in-house leaders' knowledge of a particular area or issue," he says.

Agency mobilizers need to be familiar with the best tools from a wide range of sources. If you can service missions pastors by pointing them to quality resources that address a problem or improve training or build vision, you will become a valued friend. Sometimes you may recommend the church engage with an agency other than your own because the fit is better. Your candor and Kingdom mentality will build credibility and open doors for future cooperation with that church.



### PROVIDE INFORMATION BEFORE WE ASK

Accountability is a high value in most large churches. Therefore, if the church has sent a missionary with your agency, the missions pastor and leadership team are concerned about ministry effectiveness. Familiarize yourself with the church's accountability requirements and expectations, then assume responsibility to see that they are met. This may be simple if your organization automatically sends regular evaluations to churches, but if not, you may need to facilitate the completion of reports.

Their missionary's health and wellbeing are also highly valued by these congregations. Agency policies vary, but if you are not routinely informed when there is a concern about the missionary's personal or family situation, you must help those who are in the loop know and respond to the church's expectations for information about pastoral care issues.

One missions pastor discovered a major field problem only when short-termers came home and informed him of conflicts. "I wish our agency would be more open about struggles," he says. "We want to be involved in strategy decisions and solving problems that relate to our missionaries."



### LINK US TO KEY LEADERS IN YOUR AGENCY

A frequent request from missions pastors is for direct contact with key agency decision makers. "I want to have at least one or two people in the agency who will call me if we need to discuss a missionary concern," Essamuah explains.

Sometimes agency mobilizers see themselves as the sole link and resource between church and agency, but this often creates frustration on the part of the church. Instead, one of your pivotal roles will be to introduce the missions pastor to key field leaders and home administrators. Sometimes this is best accomplished by inviting the missions pastor to visit the agency's headquarters.

Or you can recruit the appropriate person(s) in your agency to call and introduce themselves to the missions pastor. Convincing your busy colleagues to take the time to make these connections can sometimes be a challenge, but the end result is worth the trouble. Do you assure missions pastors that your agency values them as true partners? Your claim will gain a huge amount of credibility if they receive a phone call from the field leader, the personnel director, or the finance director to initiate dialog.



### FACILITATE COMMUNICATION AND PARTNERSHIP

While every church has its unique identity, large churches definitely march to their own drumbeat. It is critical that you

understand the church's expectations and serve as their interpreter to others in your agency. At times you even may need to run interference for the church (but make sure that you don't promise what you can't deliver).

For example, as Park Community develops their church-based team, Clifton explains that they expect most of the training to occur at the church, not at the agency headquarters hundreds of miles away. If an agency mobilizer were to coordinate this project, it would be critical to make sure that staff responsible for training understand and are amenable to this plan.

While most agencies today claim to require church recommendation before appointing a person to service, missions pastors still tell horror stories. One reported that a student informed him he had been accepted by an agency for short-term service. "We had never been contacted for a reference. This young man had a history of sexual and drug abuse. In another case, without consulting us, an agency assigned appointees from our church to an internship in a dying congregation 50 miles away. It was anything but the positive mentoring experience I knew they needed."

Such mistakes usually are not the fault of the mobilizer, but your relationship with the church will suffer if they occur. Help your HR staff understand the necessity of church input on recruitment decisions. "Potential candidates should not be treated as orphans," Edwards emphasizes, "but seen within the context and mission priorities of their churches."



### INVOLVE US AS TRUE PARTNERS

"What will it take for us to get a seat at the table?" one missions pastor asked with emotion at a meeting with his peers. His frustration was echoed by others around the table who represented well-known and respected churches. These congregations invest heavily in personnel and finances with mission agencies, yet often feel excluded from key decisions about strategy, personnel, or resources.

Mobilizers serve church partners and their agency by bringing church leaders to the table when key issues are addressed by their organization. There are benefits on several levels.

Missions pastors often bring extensive experience not only as church leaders but perhaps as former field missionaries, professionals, or business leaders. Their expertise can be of great use to a mission agency when a wise mobilizer identifies their gifting and utilizes their expertise or recommends them to agency leaders. For example, would the missions pastor make a good board member? Serve effectively on a team

revising admission procedures? Contribute significantly to revamping your agency's retirement plan? It's a win/win when you use their skills and simultaneously help them get to know your agency better.



### BUILD A PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP

An experienced agency mobilizer recently admitted that one of his early mistakes was assuming that large churches had everything wired and were not interested in him or anything he had to offer. Sometimes that is true, but more often it is totally off the mark.

Many missions pastors stress they would welcome the kind of interaction described in this article, yet are seldom contacted by agency mobilizers. "I love coffee and it's hard to refuse a lunch invitation!" Edwards says with a grin. "Seriously, don't come to us claiming to have the answers to the world, but if we sit down for informal dialog, we often can discover opportunities for mutual benefit."

"I would love to have someone ask to meet with me," declared a missions pastor from a large church populated almost entirely by young adults ripe for recruitment. "I wear three different hats at the church, and I can give only about one-third of my time to missions. Pursue me. Take me out for lunch. Ask me insightful questions. Understand my context and interact with me about ideas and implementation. That would be a dream!"

Have you sometimes considered large churches unapproachable or disinterested? While emphasizing the need to be responsive to the priorities of the church, these missions pastors were unanimous in asserting that they do want to continue to work cooperatively with agencies. "The need for mission agencies is not a thing of the past, Clifton emphasizes. "But working cooperatively is essential."

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Are there other important keys you would like to add? Do you have a follow-up question for one of these missions pastors? The Catalyst website includes an **Interchange Postings Forum** for your reactions at [www.catalystservices.org/forum/](http://www.catalystservices.org/forum/).

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